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ABSTRACT

Shared decision-making (SDM) is becoming a part of many American schools. Shared decision making is based on a premise that relies on four main assumptions: (1) those closest to the children will make the best decisions concerning the children's education; (2) teachers, parents, and school staff should have influence in policies; (3) those who implement the decisions should have a voice in the decisions; and (4) if those implementing the decision feel a sense of ownership of the decisions, they are more likely to implement the decision effectively. The idea behind SDM is not to replace the principal as a school leader, but rather incorporate the principal into a decision-making team. The purpose of SDM is to improve school effectiveness, improve student learning, increase staff commitment, and ensure schools are responsive to student's needs. There are some disadvantages to SDM; for example, SDM creates new demands on teachers and administrators. Successful implementation of SDM is dependent on many variables, five of which are: (1) start small, go slow; (2) agree on specifics at the outset; (3) be clear about procedures, roles, and expectations; (4) give everyone a chance to get involved; and (5) build trust and support. (Contains 10 references.) (KDP)

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ED 368 034

Shared Decision-Making

by Lynn Balster Liontos

Shared decision-making (SDM) seems destined to be one of the major reforms of the '90s. With organizations such as the American Association of School Administrators and the National Education Association pushing for adoption of SDM—and the mandating of SDM by some states or school districts—educators need to learn as much as possible about SDM's complexities. One of the first steps to success with SDM is understanding what it is.

What Are the Premises and Goals of SDM?

SDM is an elusive concept to grasp, say Lew Allen and Carl Glickman (1992). It involves fundamental changes in the way schools are managed, and alterations in the roles and relationships of everyone in the school community. SDM is a *process* of making educational decisions in a collaborative manner at the school level. This process is an ongoing one; SDM "cannot be done once and then forgotten," says B.J. Meadows (1990).

While SDM takes many forms, it emphasizes several common beliefs or premises, according to Scott Bauer (1992): First, those closest to the children and "where the action is" will make the best decisions about the children's education. Second, teachers, parents, and school staff should have more say about policies and programs affecting their schools and children. Third, those responsible for carrying out decisions should have a voice in determining those decisions. Finally, change is most likely to be effective and lasting when those who implement it feel a sense of ownership and responsibility for the process.

The purpose of SDM is to improve school effectiveness and student learning by increasing staff commitment and ensuring that schools are more responsive to the needs of their students and community (Bauer; John Lange 1993). "Student success and achievement must be kept in the forefront of our thinking as the reason to implement site-based, shared decision making," says Lange. Using SDM as a means to shift accountability or abolish a "top-heavy central office staff" will simply make SDM another buzzword, Lange cautions. Everyone who helps make decisions must be held accountable for their results.

Do the Benefits of SDM Outweigh Its Disadvantages?

SDM has the potential to improve the quality of decisions; increase a decision's acceptance and implementation; strengthen staff morale, commitment, and teamwork; build trust; help staff and administrators acquire new skills; and increase school effectiveness (Lynn Balster Liontos 1993).

A larger number of alternatives can be generated and analyzed when more people are involved, often resulting in innovative approaches to issues. In a fifteen-month study of six schools that switched to SDM, Lange found that as autonomy was achieved, better decisions were made than would have been under centralized school management. Trust also increased as staff gained understanding of management complexities and principals learned to respect faculty judgment.

However, SDM brings challenges as well. It places new demands on teachers and administrators. All participants must contend with a heavier workload and the frustrations that accompany a slower group process. Increased demands on participants' time may pose the greatest barrier to implementing and maintaining SDM.

In an SDM environment, teachers, who typically work in isolation from other adults in the "egg-crate organization of schools," must "engage other adults, negotiate, resolve differences, and come to decisions" concerning issues that have not traditionally fallen within the scope of their duties (Carol Weiss, Joseph Cambone, and Alexander Wyeth 1992). To do this effectively, say these authors, teachers have to "extend themselves into new arenas of expertise."

How Is the Principal's Role Changed in SDM?

SDM does not replace the principal as a decision-maker on all issues, Bauer emphasizes. Instead, the principal becomes "part of a team of decision makers" and will likely make decisions on issues outside the scope of the SDM group or committees. The principal plays a critical role in establishing and maintaining SDM.

David Stine (1993) describes the principal's new role as an organizer, adviser, and consensus builder, who takes advantage of the group's thinking. Bauer calls principals who utilize SDM "internal consultants" who provide the staff

EA 025 592

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with current research and advice. Others emphasize the facilitative aspects, such as finding space and time for staff to meet, helping groups work effectively together, and minimizing distractions and obstacles for SDM participants. The principal helps a school become ready for SDM by promoting a noncompetitive, trusting climate, creating opportunities for staff to express ideas, and placing a priority on professional development.

What Factors Are Important for SDM's Successful Implementation?

Several important guidelines have been suggested by SDM pioneers:

• *Start small, go slowly.* Evidence on the adoption of innovations, say Gene Hall and Gary Galluzzo (1991), suggests that SDM will be most successful if carried out in small steps rather than "wholesale changes" foreign to your school and participants. Analyze your school's needs, then adapt selected processes that meet your local situation; additional components can be added when the staff is ready.

• *Agree on specifics at the outset.* There is no single "right" way to do SDM; it depends on what you want from it. Many schools develop one decision-making team or council; others use several groups or committees. Unless mandated, decide who will be involved (Will you include students, parents, community members, and outside consultants?), the size of the group (Stine suggests nine to seventeen members), and how to ensure that the group will be representative. Determine how decisions will be made (majority vote or consensus) and who will make the final decisions on issues.

• *Be clear about procedures, roles, and expectations.* Lack of clarity leads to lack of progress with SDM. Staff need to understand what steps and procedures are to be followed *before* decisions are made. Allen and Glickman learned that "unclear processes created confusion that fragmented people's actions," while clear processes empowered participants. Groups also need to understand whether they are a decision-making body or an advisory one; it is demoralizing for groups to think they are making decisions only to have their decisions vetoed. At both her schools, Meadows found it useful to spell out the SDM process in writing.

• *Give everyone a chance to get involved.* Decisions made by administrative appointees as opposed to elected or volunteer representatives may be perceived as top-down decisions. Volunteer positions or task forces give people the opportunity to participate as much or as little as they want. "The more accessible the process was to all teachers," say Allen and Glickman, "the more positive feeling they had for the process."

• *Build trust and support.* If mistrust and apprehension exist between administrators and teachers, SDM is not easily accepted. Don't push solutions on the group or override decisions delegated to SDM teams. Lack of hierarchical support can also lead to failure. "If the culture outside the school does not change," say Hall and Galluzzo, "those inside the school will find it difficult to take charge of decision making."

Which Issues Should SDM Groups Focus on?

One of the most difficult areas for many schools is not who should be involved in SDM and how, but what areas should be addressed. Allen and Glickman encourage schools to pick a single, uncomplicated issue, then slowly build on the number and complexity of issues. Many schools get bogged down in what Allen and Glickman term "zero-impact" issues, such as lunchroom supervision or bus duties—topics that may affect teachers' lives but don't have significant educational impact.

Peggy Kirby (1992) suggests that SDM teams will be more likely to focus on issues of greater significance when minor faculty concerns are resolved first. Knowledge plays a part, too, as Kirby found that groups who "risk resolving schoolwide instructional concerns" are more successful when they thoroughly investigate alternatives, disseminate this information to others, and analyze consequences before making decisions.

SDM is neither a panacea for all of America's educational problems nor a "quick fix." Lange emphasizes that this "valuable resource" must be viewed in the context of restructuring, as a piece of the larger puzzle that hopefully will produce change in our schools.

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